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ROMAN HOURS

BY NORMAN DOUGLAS

ROME is not only the most engaging capital in Europe, it is unusually heterogeneous in regard to population. The average Parisian will assure you that his family has lived in that town from time immemorial. It is different here. There are few Romans discoverable in Rome, save across the Tiber. Talk to whom you please, you will soon find that either he or his parents are immigrants. The place is filled with hordes of employees—many thousands of them, high and low, from every corner of the provinces; the commoner sort, too, the waiters, carpenters, plasterers, masons, painters, coachmen, all the railway folk; they are hardly ever natives. Your Roman of the lower classes does not relish labour. He can do a little amateurish shop-keeping, he is fairly good as a cook, but his true strength, as he frankly admits, consists in eating and drinking. That is as it should be. It befits the tone of a metropolis that outsiders shall do its work. That undercurrent of asperity is less noticeable here than in many towns of the peninsula. There is something of the *grande dame* in Rome, a flavour of old-world courtesy. The inhabitants are better-mannered than the Parisians; a work-day crowd in Rome is as well-dressed as a Sunday crowd in Paris. And over all broods a gentle weariness.

The city has undergone orgies of bloodshed and terror. Think only, without going further back, of that pillage by the Spanish and German soldiery under Bourbon; half a year's pandemonium. And all those other mediæval scourges, epidemics and floods and famines. That sirocco, the

worst of many Italian varieties: who shall calculate its debilitating effect upon the stamina of the race? Up to quite a short time ago, moreover, the population was malarious; older records reek of malaria; that, assuredly, will leave its mark upon the inhabitants for years to come. And the scorching Campagna beyond the walls, that forbidden land in whose embrace the city lies gasping, flame-encircled, like the scorpion in the tale. * * *

A well-known scholar, surveying Rome with the mind's eye, is so impressed with its "eternal" character that he cannot imagine this site having ever been occupied otherwise than by a city. To him it seems inevitable that these walls must always have stood where now they stand—must have risen, he suggests, out of the earth, unaided by human hands. Yet somebody laid the foundation stones, once upon a time; somebody who lived under conditions quite different from those that supervened. For who—not five thousand, but, say five hundred years ago—who would have thought of building a town on a spot like this? None but a crazy despot, some moonstruck Oriental such as the world has known, striving to impress his dreams upon a recalcitrant nature. No facilities for trade or commerce, no scenic beauty of landscape, no harbour, no defence against enemies, no drinking water, no mineral wealth, no food-supplying hinterland, no navigable river—a dangerous river, indeed, a perpetual menace to the place—every drawback, or nearly so, which a town may conceivably possess, and all of them huddled into a fatally unhealthy environment, compressed in a

girdle of fire and poison. Human ingenuity has obviated them so effectually, or triumphantly that, were green pastures not needful to me as light and air, I, for one, would nevermore wander beyond those ancient portals. * * *

The country visits you here. It comes in the wake of that evening breeze which creeps about with stealthy feet, winding its way into the most secluded courtyards and sending a sudden shiver through the frail bamboos that stand beside your dinner-table in some heated square. Then it departs mysteriously as it came, and leaves behind a great void—a torrid vacuum which is soon filled up by the honey-sweet fragrance of hay and aromatic plants. Every night this balsamic breath invades the town, filling its streets with ambrosial suggestions. It is one of the charms of Rome at this particular season; quite a local speciality, for the phenomenon could never occur if the surrounding regions were covered with suburbs or tilth or woodland—were aught save what they are: a desert whose vegetation of coarse herbage is in the act of withering. The Campagna once definitely dried, this immaterial feast is at an end.

I am glad never to have discovered anyone, native or foreign, who has been aware of the existence of this nocturnal emanation; glad because it corroborates a theory of mine, to wit, that mankind is forgetting the use of its nose; and not only of nose, but of eyes and ears and all other natural appliances which help to capture and intensify the simple joys of life. We all know the civilised, the industrial eye—how atrophied, how small and formless and expressionless it has become. The civilised nose, it would seem, degenerates in the other direction. Like the cultured potato or pumpkin it swells in size. The French are civilised and, if we may judge by old engravings (what else are we to

take as guide, seeing that the skull affords some criterion as to shape but not size of nose?) they certainly seem to accentuate this organ in proportion as they neglect its use. Parisians, it strikes me, are running to nose; they wax more rat-like every day. Here is a little problem for anthropologists. There may be something, after all, in the condition of Paris life which fosters the development of this pecky, rodential countenance. Perfumery, and what it implies? There are scent-shops galore in the fashionable boulevards, whereas I defy you to show me a single stationer. Maupassant knew them fairly well, and one thinks of that story of his:

“Le parfum de Monsieur?”

“La verveine. * * *”

Speaking of the French, I climbed those ninety odd stairs the other day to announce my arrival in Italy to my friend Mrs. N., who, being vastly busy about something and on no account to be disturbed, least of all by a mere male, sent word to say that I might wait on the terrace or in that microscopic but well-equipped library of hers. I chose the latter, and there browsed a while on the *Emaux et Camées* and the *Fleurs du Mal* which happened, as was meet and proper, to lie beside each other.

Strange reading, at this distance of time. These, I thought—these are the things which used to give us something of a thrill.

If they no longer provide that sensation, it may well be that we have absorbed their spirit so thoroughly into our system that we forget whence we drew it. They have become part of ourselves. Even now, one cannot help admiring Gautier's precision of imagery, his gift of being quaint and yet lucid as a diamond; one pictures those crocodiles fainting in the heat, and notes, too, whence the author of the *Sphynx* drew his hard, glittering, min-

erological flavour. The verse is not so much easy as facile. And not all the grace of internals can atone for external monotony. That trick—that full stop at the end of nearly every fourth line—it impairs the charm of the music and renders its flow jerky; coming, as it does, like an ever-repeated blow, it grows wearisome to the ear, and finally abhorrent.

Baudelaire, in form, is more cunning and variegated. He can also delve down to depths which the other never essayed to reach. But, as to substance, he contains too many nebulosities and abstractions for my taste; a veritable mist of them, out of which emerges—what? The figure of one woman. Reading these *Fleurs du Mal* we realise, not for the first time, that there is something to be said in favour of libertinage for a poet. We do not need Petrarca, much less the Love-Letters of a Violinist—no, we do not need those Love-Letters at all—to prove that a master can draw sweet strains from communion with one mistress, from a lute with one string; a formidable array of songsters, on the other hand, will demonstrate how much fuller and richer the melody grows when the instrument is provided with the requisite five (or seven, or nine), the desirable fifty. Monogamous habits have been many a bard's undoing.

Twenty years' devotion to that stupid and spiteful old cat of a semi-negress! They make one conscious of the gulf between the logic of the emotions and that other one—that logic of the intellect which ought to shape our actions. Here was Baudelaire, a man of ruthless self-analysis. Did he never see himself as others saw him? Did he never say: "You are making a fool of yourself"?

Be sure he did.

You are making a fool of yourself: are not those the words I ought to have uttered when, standing in the centre of the

Piazza del Popolo—the sunny centre: so it had been inexorably arranged—I used to wait and wait, with eyes glued to the clock hard by, in the slender shadow of that obélisque which crawled reluctantly, like the finger of fate, over the burning stones?

And I crawled with it, blissfully content.

Days of infatuation!

I never pass that way now without chuckling inwardly and thanking God for a misspent youth. Why not make a fool of yourself? It is good fun while it lasts; it yields mellow mirth for later years, and are not our fellow-creatures, those solemn buffoons, ten times more ridiculous? What is the use of experience, if it does not make you laugh? The Logic of the Intellect—what next! If any one had treated me to such tomfoolery while standing there, petrified into a pillar of fidelity, in that creeping shadow, I should have replied gravely:

"The Logic of the Intellect, my dear Sir, is incompatible with situations like mine. It was not invented for so stupendous a crisis. I am waiting for my negress—can't you understand?—and she is already seven minutes late. * * *"

A flaming morning, foretaste of things to come.

I find myself, after an early visit to the hospital where things are doing well, glancing down, towards midday, into Trajan's Forum, as one looks into some torrid bear-pit.

Broken columns glitter in the sunshine; the grass is already withered to hay. Drenched in light and heat, this Sahara-like enclosure is altogether devoid of life save for the cats. The majority are dozing in a kind of torpor, or moribund, or dead.

My experiences in the hospital half an hour ago dispose me, perhaps, to regard this menagerie in a more morbid fashion

than usual. To-day, in particular, it seems as if all the mangy and decrepit cats of Rome had given themselves a *rendezvous* on this classic soil; cats of every colour and every age—quite young ones among them; all, one would say, at the last gasp of life. This pit, this crater of flame, is their "Home for the Dying." Once down here, nothing matters any more. They are safe at last from their old enemies, from dogs and carriages and boys. Waiting for death, they move about in a stupid and dazed manner. Sunlight streams down upon their bodies. One would think they preferred to expire in the shade of some pillar or slab. Apparently not. Apparently it is all the same. It matters nothing where one dies.

There is one immediately below me, a moth-eaten desiccated tortoiseshell; its eyes are closed and a red tongue hangs out of the mouth. I drop a small pebble. It wakes up and regards me stoically for a moment. Nothing else. The eyes are closed once more.

These cats have lost their all—their self-respect. Grace and ardour, sleekness of coat and buoyancy of limb are gone out of them. Tails are knotted with hunger and neglect; bones protrude through the skin. So they strew the ground in discomposed, un-catlike attitudes, while the sun burns through their parched anatomy. Do they remember their kittenish pranks, those moonlit ecstasies on housetops, that morsel snatched from a fishmonger's barrow and borne through the crowded traffic in a series of delirious leaps? Who can tell! They are not even bored with themselves. They are alive when they ought to be dead. Nobody knows it better than they do. Their fur is in patches. They know it. They are too ill, too far gone, to feel a sense of shame at their present degradation. Nothing matters.

Yonder is an old one giving milk to the phantom of a kitten. The parent takes no interest in the proceedings; she lies prone, her head on the ground. Her eyes have a glassy look. Is she dead? Possibly. Is it her own kitten? Who cares! Her neighbour, once white but now earth-coloured, rises stiffly as though dubious whether the joints are still in working order. What does she think of doing? It would seem she has formed no plan. She walks up to the mother, peers intently into her face, and then sits apart on her haunches after the fashion of a dog, and begins staring at the sun. Presently she rises anew and proceeds five or six paces for no imaginable reason—then collapses; falls, quite abruptly, on her side. There she lies, flat, like a playing-card.

A sinister aimlessness pervades the actions of those that move at all. The shadow of death is upon these creatures in the scorching sunshine. They stare at columns of polished granite, at a piece of weed, at one another, as though they had never seen such things before. They totter about on tip-toe; they yawn and forget to shut their mouths. Here is one, stretching out a hind leg in a sustained cramp; another is convulsed with nervous twitchings; yet another scratches the earth in a kind of mechanical trance. One would say she was preparing a grave for herself.

Most of them lie there blankly in a faint. Are they suffering? Hungry or thirsty? I doubt it. They are too sick of life to think of such things. Their fur is in shreds, their ribs are showing. They know it. And what does it matter. * * *?

"*L'Albergo dei gatti*," says a cheery voice at my side—some countryman who has also discovered Trajan's Forum to be one of the sights of Rome. "The cats' hotel. But," he adds, "I see no restaurant attached to it."—*Anglo-Italian Review*.